

THE LIFE & DEATH OF FORTUNE COOKIE TYRANT

Dean Wesley Smith

You will live your life by direct instructions.

—Chinese fortune cookie

The origin of a tyrant is often a mixture of common sense, wild strangeness, and a lot of luck. Those three factors led to the creation of one of the world's most feared and misunderstood dictators, Fortune Cookie Tyrant, or just FC among his minions when speaking of him in private.

Every great ruler's story usually starts with a single event. Seven-month-old Fortune Cookie Tyrant, then named Steven, had just soiled his diaper while strapped into his high chair near his mother, Betty, at the end of the table at Fon Wong's Emporium and Lounge. The smell of Steven's little event mixed well with the smell of the last few bites of fried rice and overcooked chow mein, so, for a while, no one noticed. Steven's dad, Frank, burped, pushed his plate aside, and leaned back, patting his growing beer gut. "Good food."

Every Wednesday night he said the same thing after eating the same dinner at Fo Wong's, so Betty just nodded and kept eating. He always finished ahead of her and then wanted to leave, so her only hope now of enjoying the last few bites of food was to work fast.

Steven, being somewhat uncomfortable with the nature call, started to "fuss," as his mother called it. Sensing that Steven was going to be a problem, and wanting to just finish the last few mouthfuls of her dinner, Betty reached over and gave Steven a fortune cookie that had been left on top of the bill. It had been her cookie, but at this point it didn't matter.

Distracted for the moment from the loaded diaper, Steven played with the cookie, finally managing to crack it open before putting it in his mouth, fortune and all.

"Whoa there, big fella," his dad said, reaching over and pulling the paper and most of the cookie from Steven's mouth. "You gotta read the fortune before eating it."

Betty laughed and just kept eating, glad for the few extra moments, as Frank opened the fortune and read it aloud. "Big fella, it says you will live your life by direct instructions."

Steven's father granted and glanced at Betty before tossing the slip of paper on the table between the dirty plates. "What kinda stupid fortune is that?"

Actually, unknown to either Frank or Betty or the growingly more uncomfortable Fortune Cookie Tyrant, it was a charmed fortune, cursed by the magic of an angry Chinese man whose brother had slept with his wife.

The cookie had been specially made for the man's brother, with the curse on the fortune intended to let the angry man push his brother around and pay him back for his deed by giving him fortune cookies with really nasty instructions inside. But as luck would have it, the charmed cookie that was to set the entire process in motion was lost in the packing process. Instead of being sent to the angry man who could then give it to his brother, it was added to a shipment headed for the United States, where it ended up in Steven's hands at Fo Wong's Emporium and Lounge.

Common sense, wild luck, and a strange curse had come together to change Steven into Fortune Cookie Tyrant, a man whose entire life and therefore the future of the entire world was to be steered by the fortunes included in small desserts.

As life would have it, Steven's parents were killed the following weekend in a tragic deer hunting accident. Steven was sent to live with his wicked and uncaring aunt who hated Chinese food. Thus it was twenty years and five months before Steven got his next "fortune" and came to realize his true powers for

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The date with Amy wasn't going well. They had met in a freshman United States history class at the university and smiled at each other for a few classes before Steven had had the courage to talk to her, and eventually ask her for a

date. Steven, at this point in his life, was not an attractive man. He looked like a bad cross between a nerdy scientist in a movie and Ichabod Crane. He had just finished into his last growth spurt and had the social skills of a stumbling tenth grader, even though he was in college. Amy was no real catch, either, but for Steven, any woman who agreed to go out with him was someone special. He had fantasized for days about making love to her.

Now, sitting in Amy's favorite Chinese restaurant, the conversation had lagged and become strained toward the end of dinner, and all Steven could think about was how he was going to get her back to his dorm room and into bed. He

had no idea what she was thinking about, and had no idea how to ask her. In fact, he had no idea at all what to even talk about next. It was *that* sort of uncomfortable moment. She picked up the tray holding the two fortune cookies, smiled at him from behind her thick glasses, and said, “You first.”

He took the small cookie, she handed him the tray, then she took the second. He was about to pop the entire thing into his mouth when she broke hers open and took out the little slip of paper. He did the same, puzzling at the strange feeling that came over him when he read the words, “Intuition will help you solve puzzling problems.”

He glanced up at her as she shook her

head at her fortune and then flipped it toward him. “Dumb, really dumb. I’m supposed to come into money shortly. Yeah, that’s going to happen. Why can’t they ever do anything original with these cookies?”

Steven wasn’t listening. He knew instantly how to solve his problem, how to get her back to his dorm room, and into a position they might both enjoy. He didn’t know how he knew, but with one look at her, he just knew.

Not allowing himself to stop and think about what he was doing, he reached his hand past the half-eaten plate of pork fried rice and touched her hand, looking into her startled eyes.

“I’ve got a confession to make,” he

said, letting himself smile just a little to not make his words seem threatening, “I’ve been sitting here this entire dinner trying not to stare at you. You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and I just had to tell you that.”

His words were smooth, smoother than he had ever spoken in his life, his voice deeper, his tone perfect, his eyes focused and caring. Steven marveled at himself as this new power took over his body, smoothly talking to Amy, making her laugh, making her squeeze his hand with the promise of the night. From that moment on, he said the exact right thing at every exact right moment. And considering that he had never been with a woman his entire life, and had only

watched a few porn films, he was a perfect lover as well. It seemed that the power to know how to solve her needs, as well as his own, stuck with him long after the dinner was gone.

The next morning, after she had left with a long kiss and a hope for more time with him, the power didn't go with her. He just sort of knew how to solve problems, how to deal with things that just the day before would have left him puzzled and lost.

And from that day forward his classes, once challenging, were insanely easy. He knew how to get extra money when he needed it, how to make himself look better, and how to talk a woman into bed. Within a few months, he had a

new wardrobe, had moved into an apartment, had bought a nice car, and had a perfect grade point average.

Fortune Cookie Tyrant had taken his first step toward world domination and control, and not once did he link it to the fortune in the cookie; thus it was over a year before he took his second step toward his true destiny.

The football game had been awful, and the team had lost badly, making Steven's mood at the Chinese dinner more somber than excited. He had never played football because he had always been too skinny and uncoordinated and his aunt had hated the game. But that didn't matter. He loved watching football, and over the last year had

become one of the university team's biggest fans. Across the table from Steven was his date, Jane, a woman with few brains, long legs, and a sexual appetite that needed to be fed often. At first the combination had attracted him, along with the fact that she was way out of his class in looks. But now, after dating for almost three weeks, he had to admit she was starting to wear him out.

Besides that, the conversation with her when they weren't making love was deadly dull.

"Oh, I love fortune cookies," Jane said, clapping her hands like she was kid and reaching for one as the waiter set the bill down on the table.

Steven just shook his head, took the

leftover cookie and broke it apart. Then he read the fortune. “Your natural ability with words will make you a leader that many will follow.”

“Yeah, right,” he said, flipping the fortune back onto the table. But he could feel that something around the table, around the entire restaurant had suddenly changed. Everyone was looking at him. It creeped him out.

He checked to make sure he didn't have a big hunk of pork hanging off his nose or a noodle caught in his hair. Nothing. Even his zipper was up and tight.

“What shall we do next?” Jane asked, her eyes peering into his like his every word suddenly mattered. She was

leaning forward, showing him a nice view of one of her best assets. Steven glanced around at everyone watching him as the silence in the restaurant settled in. Creepy.

He glanced back down at the table and the fortune caught his eye. “. . . a leader that many will follow.”

His intuition sense told him that he had gained something special tonight. But for the first time in a long time, he wanted to test that sense. He looked directly at Jane. He'd had a great dream the other night about watching her dance naked. Why not try that? “I'm up for some dancing naked in the street.”

He said it just loud enough for most of the patrons in the small restaurant to

hear. He wanted to just shock those staring at him, make them look away. But actually, more than anything, he wanted to see Jane dancing naked in the street. That would be a lot of fun.

“Great idea!” Jane said, again clapping her hands together like she was ten. “I wish I had thought of that. I’m ready when you are.”

He swallowed and glanced at the slip of paper on the table, then up at Jane. Maybe this fantasy was about to come true.

Then he noticed that instead of snickers from the other patrons around the restaurant, they were nodding, laughing, putting their napkins on unfinished meals, talking to each other

about how wonderful it would be to dance naked in the street.

Steven sat there, stunned. The entire restaurant was getting ready to follow him out the front door. He picked up the little piece of paper with the fortune, stared at it, one word coming clearly to focus. “. . .

. many . . .”

Which meant not all. He glanced around at all the excited people getting ready to follow him. There were two people out of the thirty or so who weren't getting ready to do anything. They were just sitting, looking stunned at what was being suggested around them. One was a young woman with long black hair, and the other a blond-haired

jocklike man with a chiseled jaw. Not everyone would follow his lead.

But most would.

A good lesson to learn.

He shrugged. He had to see where this would lead, but his intuition told him that it would lead anywhere he wanted it to lead.

Ten minutes later, fully clothed, he stood on the sidewalk watching as the entire customer base of the restaurant, minus two, danced naked in the street. Cars had stopped and many inhabitants of the nearby buildings were staring. Luckily, it wasn't a bad sight, considering it was a restaurant full of college students. Steven told Jane, loud enough for everyone close by to hear, to

keep dancing and that he would be back.

Jane nodded and everyone kept dancing to some silent music, all stark naked. With his words, a number of pedestrians and drivers who had been watching nodded, took their clothes off, and joined in. The two that hadn't followed him were standing in the restaurant door, staring at him. He waved at them, then with a laugh that didn't sound anywhere near as evil as he wanted it to, he walked off down the street, thinking about what had just happened and what it meant to his future. Fortune Cookie Tyrant had taken his second step to world domination. He was coming to understand some of his powers and he knew he was going to

enjoy using them. He just didn't know what exactly to do with them just yet.

The next morning, Steven stared at the headlines in the morning paper as he sipped his morning coffee while sitting at the long counter in Larry's Diner and Deli.

NUDE PARTY BREAKS OUT IN CHINESE RESTAURANT.

The article said that no one really knew what happened, only that dancing nude in the street had sounded like fun and so they did it. Thirty-two people. Public indecency charges were pending. Steven laughed and tossed the paper onto the counter. Being from a broken home and having been raised by his evil and uncaring aunt, Steven had very few

morals. Normally, a nerd like Steven would have had few chances to push against what morals he did have. He had just assumed he would end up working some dead-end job, marry some woman who would go to fat after two kids, and die mostly broke with a bunch of grandkids arguing over his comic book collection. But now it seemed he had a more promising future. He could run a big company, he could become a senator or even the president. Or he could just get very, very rich and live an easy life surrounded by beautiful woman.

Or maybe he could do all those things.

“Why not?” Steven said out loud.

The guy two seats away down the counter said, “I agree. Why not?”

Steven glanced at him, then around at the diner. The cook, the waitress, and the five other customers were all staring at him, waiting for him to say something, like what he might say might be important. Creepy. Having this kind of power over everyone around him might just get old. Then Steven laughed and said out loud, “That’s not going to happen.”

Everyone in the restaurant nodded. “You’re right,” the guy said beside him. “That’s not going to happen.”

He glanced at the waitress. “You sure you don’t mind paying for my breakfast?”

She blinked, surprised, then smiled and said, “Not a problem.”

“Thanks,” he said, laughing and heading for the door.

This new power was going to be a lot of fun. But first, he had a lot of planning to do. That afternoon, Steven went back to his apartment and started to do some research on the Web. He needed to know how others had gained vast wealth and power if he was going to follow in their footsteps. He needed to know their history, and the steps they took to keep the power. And most of all, he needed to know what they did wrong. If he was going to get as much power as he was hoping to get, he needed to know how others lost theirs.

While running computer searches on different references to power,

presidents, Caesars, dictators, and other tyrants throughout history, he came across a Web site that was titled “Checklist for the Aspiring Evil Overlord.”

The site was supposed to be a joke, aimed at all the bad cliché’s Evil Overlords had in fiction, but Steven knew better. The site was a great reference guide to stop those who wouldn’t follow him. Those two in that restaurant clearly haunted him, worried him more than he wanted to let on. And the checklist was filled with rules aimed at stopping those kinds of people.

Steven printed off checklist and studied it carefully over the next few days. Most of the suggestions were

things that would matter later in his climb to riches, power, and maybe even world control. He was starting to really think big.

But many of the suggestions in that list would help him on his rise to power. For example,

#28: A bullet to the head shall *never* be too good for my enemies. Steven would always keep that firmly in mind, along with #92: I will never fail to keep in mind my strengths and my weaknesses.

Then, after posting the list on the bulletin board in his kitchen, he took out the little slip of paper he had gotten from the fortune cookie and read it one more time.

He needed to see if what he was thinking was right, that he had somehow gotten his powers from these fortune cookies. So he headed back to the Chinese restaurant he and Jane had eaten at the night before. The employees were amazingly happy to see him as he came through the door, considering that most of them were facing charges for dancing nude and the restaurant was being investigated for spiking the food in some manner. Even with all that, there were still twenty people eating in the place and the moment he spoke to the man behind the front counter, they all stopped and turned to listen.

“I’d love to buy a large bag of your fortune cookies,” Steven said.

“Here, take ours,” one man at a table close by said, offering Steven their cookies. His wife was nodding, looking like a puppy trying to please a master.

“No, thanks,” Steven said, waving the man off. “You two enjoy them.”

Immediately the man and woman dug into the cookies, acting as if they were having small orgasms while crunching on the cookie, paper and all.

The man behind the counter grabbed a large bag that had to have three hundred fortune cookies in it.

“This good?”

“That’s perfect,” Steven said. “And it’s very kind of you to give them to me.”

“The honor is ours,” the man said.

Steven laughed as he left. It was

getting easier and easier to get everything for free. Whatever was happening with him, he sure loved it. He could get used to everyone waiting for him to talk. After all, that's what everyone did around those in power.

Back in his apartment, Steven opened the bag, got a glass of milk from the fridge, and cracked into the first cookie. It was the same basic fortune that Jane had gotten the night before.

"You will come into a vast sum of money."

Steven laughed. "Yeah, that's going to happen."

A moment later, before he could even wash down the cookie with a sip of milk, the phone rang. He never did get

back to the fortunes that day because his evil old aunt had had a stroke and was in the hospital. He didn't much like her, but he was the only thing she had. She died before he got there, which didn't actually upset him. The last thing he would have needed was the old bag hanging on and building up hospital bills.

He spent most of the night dealing with all the details of his aunt's death, then the rest of the night at Jane's, making her do things naked that no woman outside of porn films ever really did. He sure loved his new power.

It was the next morning, after making funeral arrangements and talking to his aunt's attorney that he came to

understand what had happened. His aunt had left him everything, and the old broad had been rich. Millions rich, or so the attorney thought. It was still too early to tell just how much it might be. Steven laughed all the way back to his apartment. Now he had his stake to get him started toward his plan of world domination. The cookie had been right again.

There was no telling what the next cookie would bring him. He could just keep opening cookies and gaining power.

Today, he would become a truly powerful being.

The bag of fortune cookies and the half-empty glass of old milk were right

where he had left them. He dumped out the milk, got himself a fresh glass, then took the first cookie off the top of the bag. He cracked it open, tossed half into his mouth, then read the fortune as he ate, as excited as a kid opening a present on Christmas morning.

But this fortune didn't seem right and he had to read it twice:

“All special powers that you have been given by fortune cookies will be forever lost.”

Steven tossed the slip away like it was on fire, but it was too late. The feelings of being in control drained away from him like someone had pulled a plug in his shoe.

“No!” he screamed. “That’s not a

fortune!”

He slammed the rest of the uneaten cookie into the wall and grabbed another one from the bag, opening it and putting half in his mouth before reading the fortune.

It said the same thing.

And so did the next one and the next one.

He opened a hundred before giving up and sitting down on a stool in disgust. Someone had planted the entire bag with the same fortune. But who? And why? And who would have known he was going to come back here and open all these?

A moment later the phone rang. It was his aunt's attorney again, talking some

sort of gibberish about taxes and problems with the government and how there wasn't as much money as there had seemed to be earlier, maybe none at all after all the lawyer fees and hospital costs. Steven just listened in shock, said nothing, then hung up.

The money was gone as well, right along with his powers.

He stared at the kitchen counter covered in half-opened fortune cookies. He knew, without a doubt, he had lost everything, all his dreams of ruling the world.

But how? Why had someone done this to him, taken his specialness?

Then the faces of those two sitting in the Chinese restaurant came back clearly

to mind. Not everyone would follow him. Someone had known what was happening, somehow, and had changed out his real cookies with these special ones.

He needed to find out who. And why.

He dumped the entire sack of cookies out on the counter. At the bottom was a note.

Dear Fortune Cookie Tyrant,

Steven stopped reading and sat down on the stool. That was a name he had only been thinking about using after he gained world domination. No one would know it now. Something wasn't right here. Steven went back to reading the note.

You forgot rule #85. And sorry about

the slow-acting and very painful poison in the cookies, but after what you did to the world over the last forty years, after all the people you killed and enslaved, we figured it was the least we could do.

Signed,

The Anti-Cookie Alliance.

Steven could feel the pain in his stomach starting to grow.

He swept all the cookies from the countertop, then doubled over in pain. He had been poisoned. He got to the phone and dialed 911, begged for them to hurry, told the operator that the poison was in the cookies, then hung up as another wave of pain hit him.

As it eased, his mind went back to the

note. Rule 85? What did the note mean by that? And forty years?

He was only twenty. He hadn't been alive yet for forty years.

In the distance, a siren was growing louder. Help was on the way. Then he saw the list on his bulletin board, the list of things he would do if he became an Evil Overlord. The list that he promised himself he would follow carefully.

With the pain in his gut causing him to stumble, he went to the board, pulled off the list, and slumped to the kitchen floor, his back against the wall. Outside his apartment, the sound of the siren stopped. He could see the flashing lights through the window.

Help would be here in a moment. He

forced himself to take a deep breath to hold back the pain and flip the list to the right place.

Rule 85. Once I have securely established myself, all time travel devices in my realm shall be utterly destroyed.

“No!” Steven shouted as the pain shot through his body. “I didn’t get to become an evil overlord! I didn’t get to be Fortune Cookie Tyrant!”

There was a banging on the door and his name was called out.

He tried to get up, but instead fell facedown onto the tile floor. The last words the great Fortune Cookie Tyrant muttered were, “Not fair.”